

MURDER AT
THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT
MUSEUM

By Jim Eldridge

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For Lynne, for always

CHAPTER ONE

London 1899

The tendrils of thick, pea-souper fog snaked through the London night, fog so thick that the lights from the gas lamps in the streets were rendered useless, just blobs of pale luminous green obscured by the thick, curling, crawling smog. Anyone in the streets, and there were very few people about, had scarves tied around their noses and mouths to stop the acrid stench of burnt coal and coke being drawn down into their lungs. As it was, it stung their eyes, acid tears running down making furrows in the grime the fog brought to their faces.

No one ventured out into this fog unless their business was of vital importance. The hansom cabs were tied up, their horses stabled, because no horse could find its way in this dense murk. The prostitutes were off the streets. The beat coppers had retreated to their police stations. Even the cats had stayed indoors. Only the rats could be heard, scuttling through the rubbish in the backstreets, scavenging for food.

The exception was by the massive marquee in Kensington that hid the yet to be dug foundations for the new Victoria

and Albert Museum. Inside, the body of a man was laid to rest on the cobbled ground. A respectable-looking man. Expensive shoes. A Savile Row tailored suit. The only thing that marred the image was the gash where his throat had been cut from ear to ear.

The fog crept under the marquee and lapped at the man's dead body like green waves at the seashore. Then slowly engulfed him.

CHAPTER TWO

Daniel Wilson sat in the small, decorative balcony of their two-storey house overlooking Primrose Hill in north London. There was just enough space for two chairs either side of a small table, at which he and his wife, Abigail, would sit when the weather was fine and gaze out over the space of grass, trees and wildflowers that reached from their back gate to Prince Albert Road. Across that road was London Zoo with its menagerie of rare and exotic animals, and beyond that the vast open space that was Regent's Park. He was glad that the thick fog that had plagued London for the last two days had finally lifted so that he could savour the magnificence of the view.

Daniel still marvelled at the fact that he, a workhouse boy from Camden Town who'd entered the world of menial work at the age of twelve and who'd spent most of his thirty-eight years living in the north London slum, was now here, in what was for him one of the most desirable parts of London. The success that he and his wife had experienced as the Museum Detectives, as the press called them, had given them the financial freedom to be able to take a long-term rent on this three-bedroomed detached house, which had electric lighting and a gas stove in the kitchen. It was a

far cry from the house where he'd previously lived, and into which Abigail had moved to join him after they'd first met in Cambridge five years ago. Their previous house had been a two-up two-down terrace, with a scullery at the back and a lean-to outhouse in the backyard for the toilet. All the cooking had been done on a solid fuelled iron range in the kitchen next to the scullery. Washing had been done in the basin in the scullery, using hot water heated in kettles on the coal-fired range. Baths, which before they'd taken once a week, had been in a tin bath, brought into the kitchen from the hook where it had hung just outside the back door to the yard. It was half-filled with a mixture of hot water heated in saucepans on the range, and cold water from a tap in the scullery, carried through in a bucket. The same bucket had been used after bathing to empty the tin bath. Daniel and Abigail had shared the same bath water, taking turns to go first: one week it would be Abigail, the next Daniel, and so on. Unless both of them had had an unfortunate accident, like falling over into a pile of horse manure in the road, in which case it necessitated filling the bath twice. Now, they had a bathroom indoors, with hot water available from the tank above the boiler. They also had an indoor toilet, which meant no more trips out to the outhouse in the depths of winter holding a candle or an oil lamp. No more having to listen to the scuttling of rats and mice in the backyard.

We should have done this years ago, he thought.

The change had come the previous year, after Abigail returned from leading an archaeological expedition to the pyramids in Egypt, funded by Arthur Conan Doyle. Abigail, who had gained a Classics degree at Girton College at Cambridge University, had already established a reputation as a highly esteemed archaeologist

for her excavations and researches in Egypt before she met Daniel when he'd been hired to investigate a murder at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. At that time, Daniel had not long established himself as a private investigator after many years serving as a detective at Scotland Yard. His most notable work had been as part of Inspector Abberline's squad investigating the Jack the Ripper murders. Although that case had resulted in no convictions, it had cemented Daniel's reputation as Abberline's sergeant, and a brilliant and dogged detective. Unfortunately, the hierarchy of the Metropolitan Police, and especially at Scotland Yard, valued sticking to orders from on high above detection brilliance. That had led to Abberline resigning from the force, with Daniel following shortly after.

Abigail's return from Egypt the previous summer had led to them both realising that this relationship was one that was for ever. And so, after years of deliberating and putting things off, they'd married, and the former Abigail Fenton became Mrs Abigail Wilson, although when giving lectures and talks on archaeology, she was still billed as Abigail Fenton.

'It's important you keep your own name,' Daniel had insisted. 'You've spent your career building the reputation of Abigail Fenton, not Abigail Wilson.'

With marriage had come the move. Daniel had always been the reluctant one, his house in Camden Town, small and lacking all amenities, had been the one secure place in his life. Abigail never complained about it, even though she'd come from a far more comfortable background in Cambridge. It was Daniel who said: 'We're both nearly forty. We don't want to be lugging a tin bath around as we get older, and have to put up with going

out into the dark whenever we need to use the toilet.’ And so they’d moved. Not far, just a mile or so, but the social distance between Primrose Hill and Camden Town was enormous. And the glory of sitting on this balcony, as he was now, and looking out over the acres of fresh greenery from his own house filled Daniel with a happiness that was almost overwhelming.

‘Enjoying the view?’

Abigail stepped through the French doors of their bedroom to join him, settling herself down on the other chair.

‘I am,’ said Daniel. ‘And I was just thinking, we should have done this years ago.’

‘We’re doing it now, and that’s what counts,’ said Abigail. She held a single sheet of paper, along with the envelope from which she’d taken it, in her hand. ‘A uniformed messenger has just delivered this.’

Daniel frowned. ‘I didn’t hear the bell ring.’

‘I was in the living room and saw him approaching,’ said Abigail. ‘As he looked official, I opened the door.’ She held the piece of paper out towards him. ‘It’s from Buckingham Palace. Someone called Sir Anthony Thurrington, personal secretary to the Queen.’

Daniel looked at her stunned, then turned his attention to the letter, which bore the words Buckingham Palace at its letterhead.

‘You’ll see he says we are invited to a private audience with Her Majesty Queen Victoria this afternoon at 2 p.m. at Buckingham Palace. He adds it is a matter of the utmost urgency.’

‘I’m not sure if we can make it,’ said Daniel doubtfully. ‘It’s very short notice. I was intending to clean the windows this afternoon.’

Abigail stared at him. 'What!'

He grinned at her. 'I was joking, obviously.' But then he looked serious as he added: 'But there is a point to be made here. These people who think they are so important that they can just summon people to drop everything and come running at their whim.'

'She is important! She's the Queen, for God's sake! How much more important can anyone be?'

'Yes, but it's a point.'

'You used to do it when you were at Scotland Yard,' accused Abigail. 'You summoned people to attend.'

'That was on official business.'

'And what do you think this is?'

'It says a private audience.'

'You think she's inviting us to the palace for tea and cakes and social chit-chat?' demanded Abigail, outraged.

'All right, there's no need to get upset.'

'There's every need to get upset. This is the Queen. Empress of half the world, and you're quibbling over whether to go and see her at her summons.'

'I'm not quibbling.'

'Yes, you are.' She frowned. 'What could she want with us?'

'Perhaps she wants to congratulate you on your expedition last year to Egypt. The first to be led by a British woman.'

Abigail shook her head. 'If it was that, this Sir Anthony wouldn't have added this is an urgent matter. What's happened to the royal family recently that might concern us?'

'The Queen formally laid the foundation stone for the new Victoria and Albert Museum last month,' mused Daniel.

‘How does that affect us?’

‘I have no idea. I’m just digging up things that have been in the newspapers lately. A few days ago there was a suggestion of a scandal involving the Prince of Wales in one of the gutter press rags.’

‘What sort of scandal?’

‘I didn’t read it properly. I just saw it in the newsagent’s shop when I was picking up a copy of *The Times*. Knowing what they say about the prince, it could be some woman he’s supposed to be having an affair with, or something to do with his gambling.’

‘I can hardly see that the Queen would want to talk to us about anything like that,’ said Abigail.

‘True,’ Daniel agreed. Suddenly a thought struck him and he reached and picked up that morning’s *Times*, which he’d put on the table. ‘Wait! I saw something in this morning’s paper. I haven’t read the story properly, but the words Victoria and Albert were in there.’

‘What was it about?’

Daniel turned over the pages of the newspaper, then said triumphantly: ‘I think this might be it. “The dead body of a man was discovered yesterday morning at the site of the new Victoria and Albert Museum which is currently under construction. The dead man has been identified as one Andrew Page, a curator of the South Kensington Museum.”’

‘That’s got to be it,’ said Abigail.